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ABSTRACT

When one instructor teaches a course called "Communication and Critical Thinking," he uses Josina Makau's book "Reasoning and Communication: Thinking Critically about Arguments" (1990), which maintains that critical thinking requires training. Case methodology can be used for training, not exclusively but as an alternative to methods which require less active participation by students. Critical thinking is best exhibited by a person who can evaluate information and generate more than one possible interpretation or projected outcome. The values and purposes of case method include identifying principles and theories present in actual situations and building analytical skills. This method also trains students to test problem-solving abilities when posing solutions and recommendations, allows students to learn from their peers, and develops and strengthens effective group participation. Suggested criteria for selecting cases are: (1) true cases; (2) decision-making dilemmas; (3) an interesting plot; (4) sufficient details; (5) written clearly and coherently; (6) descriptive sub-titles; (7) illustrative of the skills being taught; (8) assignment questions generated by case facts; (9) relevance of case in time; and (10) identification of additional courses or topic areas for discussion. (A case example and teaching notes are appended.) (CR)

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The Case Method in Teaching Critical Thinking

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Case Method in Teaching Critical Thinking

When I teach our course, COM 357: Communication and Critical Thinking, I use Josina Makau's Reasoning and communication: Thinking critically about arguments. In the preface to the book, Makau (1990) contends: "Thinking critically about information involves careful assessment of the information's meaning, relevance, and reliability. Critical thinking involves discovering and assessing values, interests, and outcomes associated with relevant options. As such, critical thinking is a complex skill that, like other skills, requires training (xii)." To me, the key word is training. Training involves acquisition of information and practice in using the acquired information. How better to test training in and practice critical thinking than to use carefully selected cases?

One of the contentions advanced by members of this panel is that teaching/training can be facilitated by the use of case methodology. I don't think any of us would suggest that it be used exclusively but that it be used for variety and as an alternative to methods which require less active participation by the students. So, why use cases when teaching critical thinking?

Critical thinking is best exhibited by a person who can evaluate information and generate more than one possible interpretation or

projected outcome. Aristotle laid an early building block for us when he defined rhetoric (communication) as discovering, in any given circumstance, the available means of persuasion. Chaffee (1988) extends the implication of Aristotle's definition when he suggests that thinking critically comes from our "active, purposeful, organized efforts to make sense of the world (p. 1)." Makau (1990) adds, "(t)he critical thinking process combines innate and learned skills (p. 4)" How do we best achieve these goals in a course designed to improve critical thinking skills?

We all want our students to learn, but most of all, we want them to **think** while doing it. If we use cases well, we can achieve both goals. In part, because cases expose students, through active participation, to the opportunity to discover and to learn.

The values and purposes of case method include but are not limited to the following:

- helps identify principles and theories present in actual situations;
- builds analytical skills;
- tests problem-solving abilities when posing solutions and recommendations;
- allows students to learn from their peers; and

- develops and strengthens effective group participation (Peterson, 1994).

One of the key tools of the critical thinker is the ability to question effectively (Makau, 1990). The case method provides guided practice in questioning. It also allows the instructor to model teaching skills which help create an atmosphere conducive to effective critical thinking and debriefing of discussion: a tolerance for ambiguity; formulation of relevant questions; exploring (probing) the answers to questions; selection of appropriate directive/nondirective posture; and a demonstrated sense of timing and judgment (Kreps and Lederman, 1985).

If we are to get the most out of our class time when we use cases, we must select them carefully. Chiaramonte (1994) suggests 10 criteria for selecting cases:

1. "Is it a true case? A true case is a record of an actual decision that has been faced. Hypothetical cases are rarely effective.
2. Is there a decision-making dilemma? Easy or obvious decisions make for lousy cases. The best are those that require rigorous evaluation to determine their effectiveness.

3. Does the case tell a good story? Like all good stories, good cases must have an interesting plot. There must be drama, suspense and an issue worth investigating.
4. Are there sufficient details? The case should provide enough relevant information for students to identify with the situation and to empathize with the central characters.
5. Is it written clearly and coherently? It helps if specific names, dates, times and amounts are used. And it should be written in plain English. Optimum length is 12 pages.
6. Are there descriptive sub-titles? Outlining by sub-titles gives students an idea of the flow of the case, and it sets a framework within which data can be assessed. Analysis and interpretation will be more orderly.
7. Does it teach [illustrate] the skills you want? The best cases teach students decision-making processes that can be applied to other cases and other subjects.
8. Are assignment questions suggested by the case? The instructor should be able to identify key questions generated by the facts of the case.
9. How well does the case "age?" The relevance of a case may change with time. Even the best case may need polishing if it contains worn and outdated language.

10. Does the case suggest additional courses or uses? Potential uses of the case might identify other courses or topic areas for discussion." (p. 2)

While it is not necessary for all cases to meet all ten criteria, the more criteria met , the better the case. The case I have included in this paper (page 5) will not meet all ten, but it can be particularly useful in introducing case method in a class. Once students feel comfortable with a short case, they will feel more capable of working with longer cases and know what will be expected of them by the instructor. The teaching notes (page 6) provide some structure to avoid losing the point of the case if a group goes off in an unanticipated direction. They are the instructor's "cheat sheet."

The Case of the Big Orange

Wouldn't it be great to live where the weather was always beautiful? You could even walk out into your backyard and pick fresh, tree-ripened oranges. Can you visualize such a place? It would be perfect! Right?

One late spring day last year, just before school was out, Vernon arrived home before anyone else. He was a high school senior. In less than an hour, he had soccer practice. There was just enough time for a quick snack and do a few errands before practice began. He thinks, "I don't have much time. What would give me some energy and not weigh too heavy on my stomach?" He glanced out the kitchen window and spied a large, ripe orange on the family orange tree. He rushed out, picked it -- the only ripe one on the tree -- hurried back into the house and placed it on the kitchen counter. "I'll eat this on the way to practice," he thought to himself.

About that time the school bus stopped at the end of the block to discharge a group of neighborhood kids. One of them was Vernon's brother, James, a 7th grader. As James came up the front walk, he saw Vernon's car in the drive and concluded his brother must be in the house. "I can't forget that orange for school tomorrow," he reminded himself.

As he came through the kitchen, he noticed the large, ripe orange Vernon had placed on the kitchen counter. He picked it up and headed for his room, calling out, "Vernon, I'm home."

Vernon responds, "I'm late for soccer practice. Dad will be home in a few minutes. Can you stay out of trouble till then?"

"Sure," came the reply.

Their dad, Wilson, taught history at the local community college. He was usually home soon after James got off the bus.

Vernon, with cleats and practice clothes in hand, returned to the kitchen to collect his orange and leave for practice. Seeing the orange was missing, he called down the hall, "Did you take my orange?"

James acknowledged, "I need it!!"

"It's mine! I picked it!! It was the last ripe one," Vernon yelled back.

"But, I have to have it for school," James exclaimed as he returned to the kitchen.

Vernon had become very angry and confronted James when he came into the room.

"I told you it is mine! Give it to me!!, Vernon exploded. James retorted, "You can stop at the store and buy another one. I need this one for school."

Vernon grabbed James by the shoulders and shoved him against the wall just as Wilson entered from the garage.

"What's going on here?," Wilson asked. Both boys started to speak at once. Their dad stopped them in mid sentence.

He had always stressed fairness to the boys. He knew brothers would sometimes argue, but he deplored the use of violence to settle disagreements.

Since father always knows best, what will he do? What is the <u>best</u> course of action for Wilson to take?

"Big Orange" Teaching Notes

Use:

- to complement lecture/discussion of questioning skills and underlying assumptions

Objectives:

- **model questioning skills**[identify the "real" problem, set aside personal experience as guide to problem-solution, and identify what information is needed to make an appropriate recommendation]
- **understand the role of our own and other's underlying assumptions** [implicit and explicit]
- **practice looking for gain/gain** [integration / collaboration] **outcomes**

Three Tasks:

- Read case
- Make an individual decision as to what you would do if you were dad -- 1st thought and write it down
- **In group**, list all suggestions; discuss all and select the best; prepare to explain why your group made the choice you did

In-class Discussion Questions:

- What strategies are available to dad?
- What are the steps in effective information gathering?
- What is the problem?
- How does dad learn how to gather information effectively?
- If dad were to work through each step of the reflective thinking process, one at a time, could he come up with a "best" way to solve this problem?
- If dad used the reflective thinking process, would he always find the "best" solution faster than any other method?
- What can we learn from the case of the Big Orange?

The answer: [They both can have what they want and need.]

James needs the orange peel for cookies to take to school tomorrow.

Vernon wants to eat the inside of the orange, the pulp.

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